

A Fairy Godfather.

THE STORY OF BARBARA PAGE'S EVENTFUL SUMMER AT WHITE SULPHUR.

BY MARGARET BUSBEE SHIPP.

I.

OLD Colonel Syme had chosen that particular room because the one adjoining it seemed too small for a summer girl and her trunks, though it might perhaps accommodate a mere man. He was dismayed, therefore, to see two women enter it; and a moment later he was annoyed to find that every word of their conversation reached his ears. The cause of this, he saw at a glance, was that a door which had once opened between his room and theirs was slightly sprung at the top. He would have it attended to in the morning; in the mean time, he could not help being an unwilling eavesdropper.

The elder woman seemed to be assisting at her daughter's toilet.

"Don't touch your hair again, Barbara, it is lovely. Let me tie that bow. But you haven't your usual color, and I'm afraid your white dress won't be becoming."

"I'm so scared!" said a young voice, with an unmistakable quiver. "Weren't you frightened at your first White Sulphur dance, mother?"

"Perhaps I was," admitted the other, "just at first; but I had such a beautiful time afterwards." She sighed a little wistfully as she recalled the glories of that long-ago ball. "I hope you'll have just as happy an evening as I had here, twenty-two years ago! I am so glad I wrote Mrs. Meade that we were coming. It was nice of her son to make an engagement for your first dance. You will meet everybody to-night, and after that—I never saw you look as pale!" she broke off anxiously. "I wish you had some flowers to give you a touch of color. Do you think we could afford a few roses?"

"No, dearest, you and father are so good to let me have the summer here; you mustn't be too extravagant."

"Oh for a fairy godmother!"

"I'd rather have a fairy godfather," said the girl; "a beautiful old, white-haired gentleman, with pink cheeks and twinkling blue eyes, and out of his pumpkin should grow roses instead of a golden coach!"

Syme glanced at the shaggy brows and wrinkled, yellow face that his mirror portrayed.

"That description fits me to perfection," he chuckled. "I believe I'll play fairy godfather!"

He went down-stairs. When no one chanced to be near, he stopped at the florist's stall in the lower floor of the hotel.

"Haven't you anything prettier than these?" Syme asked, indicating the carnations.

"Yes, sir; I have five dozen magnificent American Beauties, just come in, on the ice now."

"Send them up to Room Twenty-Eight. There's no card, and you're not to tell who sent them—understand?"

"Yes, sir, certainly, sir," answered the man respectfully, thinking that there's no fool like an old fool.

The colonel was in the ball-room when Barbara Page entered on young Meade's arm. Her mother no longer had cause to bewail the lack of color. Barbara's cheeks were pink with excitement, and the deep, exquisite roses, tied with broad ribbons of the same shade, seemed to lend their glow to the girl's pretty face. She was a slip of a creature, and the flowers, with stems a yard long, were a weight for her to carry.

"Where is that rose-garden carrying that child?" somebody asked.

Most Southern men are as poor as they are charming, and Barbara was the only débutante of that season who had made her bow with sixty dollars' worth of flowers in her hands. It attracted attention—men asked to be introduced—

and that was really all that was needed to insure a successful evening, for she was dainty, sweet, and high-bred, and dancing was her *métier*.

As for Peyton Meade, he was realizing the truth of the axiom about virtue. He had made the dance engagement at his mother's request, and when he was introduced to Barbara, just after she arrived, he resigned himself to—well, to the sort of evening that may be expected by partners of timid *débutantes*.

It was a transformed Barbara whom he met at the foot of the stairs, her blue eyes shining with pleasure and anticipation. When she saw Meade, who she thought must have sent the flowers, her eyes dropped in spite of herself, and a flush swept over her face.

"Gracious, how pretty she is! I wish she would do that again," thought Meade.

When she looked up and caught the admiration in his eyes, his wish was promptly gratified.

The next morning Syme was awakened by the chatter in the adjoining room. It was very pretty chatter, but it was not intended for him, and he was glad he had remembered to give the order about the door. Barbara was telling her mother all the tiniest details of her triumphant "first night," and the mother was asking eager, girlish questions.

"I didn't know girls nowadays confided in their mothers," thought Syme. "These two seem to be regular chums!"

Presently he heard Barbara say regretfully:

"Isn't there a single one of the roses that is fresh?"

"I put them in water, but they look drooping. Perhaps these three might do," said her mother.

"Oh, dear!" groaned Syme to himself. "All that the silly girl gained by the roses last night she will lose by wearing faded ones to-day! It will make her look like remnant stock. Williams!" His valet came from the communicating room. "Hand me a bit of paper and a pencil. Take this down to the florist."

Syme rolled over in bed and waited. Presently there came the expected knock at Room Twenty-Eight.

He heard Mrs. Page say excitedly:

"It's for you—quick, cut the string! Oh, Barbara!"

Then came the sweetest sound in the world—a ripple of girlish laughter, a little laugh of pure delight that bubbled up because her heart was overcharged with happiness.

"Oh, mother, what lovely, lovely white buds!"

"Don't squeeze the breath out of me, baby mine," gasped the mother.

Very girlish and sweet Barbara looked when she entered the dining-room. She wore a simple blue and white cotton gown, and the dewy white buds emphasized the freshness that was her charm.

As for the fairy godfather, the utter joyousness of that laugh had penetrated a corner of one of the kindest old hearts that was ever hidden under a rather forbidding exterior.

Colonel Syme's physicians had ordered him to the White Sulphur to drink the mineral water, and for a week he had been a bored and unwilling victim. A plan by which he could give the little girl pleasure, and could entertain himself as well, rapidly took shape, and he sent his man for the florist.

It was arranged that every day flowers were to be sent to Miss Page, the selection being left to the florist. The man was an artist in his way, and he carried out the order faithfully. He studied Barbara Page's delicate coloring, he noticed her clothes, and he ordered accordingly. He eschewed violets and carnations; one was too grave for her, the other too old. He sent buds oftener than roses, lilies of the valley, all the soft, faint tints of sweet peas. At one dance, Barbara wore a white organdie and carried a huge bunch of mignonette. The man looked up as she passed his stall, and beamed with pleasure at the realization of the pretty picture he had anticipated.

An important item, and one that Syme never dreamed of, was the help he gave Barbara's slender wardrobe. Each bouquet was accompanied by its ribbon, and what wonders Mrs. Page's clever fingers worked with that supply! It was a "ribbon summer," and fresh sashes and bows in plenty made all the

imaginable difference in Barbara's frocks, keeping them fresh through the season's wear and tear.

II.

It was Syme's chief interest throughout the tedious summer to watch the sure evolving of Barbara's bellehood.

"It would have happened any way, just as soon as the youngsters realized what a nice little girl she is," he thought. "But perhaps I hastened their discovery."

He had done more than that. The balances of a young girl's mind change at a feather-weight; and if Barbara had felt neglected and slighted at her first ball, she might have become self-conscious, instead of blossoming into unaffected, joyous girlhood.

Only once did Syme offer her flowers in person. As he grew stronger, he was able to take brief constitutionals, and one morning he gathered a small bunch of daisies.

"This is the first nosegay I've gathered in many a day," he said, with a stiff, old-fashioned bow.

"For me?" exclaimed Barbara. "Did you really take the trouble to pick them for me?" She unpinned the sweet peas at her belt, and handed them to him. "This isn't a fair exchange, for my flowers can't give you the pleasure that yours do me!"

She looked into his face, lined with age, responsibility, and physical pain. Her young vitality throbbed with pity for him.

"It was so sweet in you to think of me. The world is so full of kindness—it is nice to live, isn't it? I shall wear your daisies all day, and—what are your initials?"

"J. W. S.," he answered, mystified.

"When the flowers are quite withered," she confided, "I shall put them in an envelope and mark it with your initials. I have a box in which I'm keeping souvenirs of the summer—german ribbons and favors, ball-cards, photographs, and the like; but only your flowers and one other's will be there."

"Who is my rival?" the old man demanded with mock fierceness.

The girl hollowed her pink palms into a speaking-tube, and whispered in his ear:

"The next-to-you nicest man at the White!"

Laughing merrily, she sped over the lawn to a group of girls who were beckoning her.

With the height of the season had come elaborate entertaining by individuals—*bals poudrés*, favor germans, fancy balls. Sometimes these were given by parents or chaperons to their charges; sometimes a young man chose that means to honor some girl. It was a compliment to which every girl aspired.

Syme scanned the personnel of Barbara Page's "rush line," as some one had dubbed her cavaliers. Meade was head over ears in love. Equally devoted were a student and an instructor from the university law school; but there was not one in the lot who could afford to give her a german except Hollis, and he never would.

Hollis was assiduous in his attentions to Miss Page at the White for exactly the same reason that would have made him devoted to Miss Taylor at Alleghany Spring, or Miss Bruce at Old Point Comfort. He liked to attach himself to the belle of the place; he liked to feel "in the swim," though he wished to be there with the least possible expenditure. Syme saw that Hollis would be an easy tool to handle.

Moreover, he was the only one of Barbara's friends with whom Syme was personally acquainted. That the colonel was a financial power in the distant State from which he hailed meant nothing to the people with whom he was thrown for the summer; but to Hollis, who studied Bradstreet and rated individuals accordingly, the rich man was surrounded with a nebular glory. He had cultivated an acquaintanceship, having unearthed a mutual liking for cribbage.

As they were playing a rubber that night, Syme drawled out:

"Well, I have you beat again!"

"I think not, sir," answered Hollis confidently.

"I bet you one of these dances you young bucks are so fond of giving that I'll have this rubber!"



"OH, DEAR, DEAR COLONEL SYME!" BARBARA CRIED IMPULSIVELY.

"Very well," said Hollis, with a quiver of excitement, thinking it was an accident that the old man had failed to state what Hollis should forfeit if he lost.

Hollis played his best, but so excitedly that he did not notice a slight bungle that Syme made at a critical point.

"That's the rubber, sir! Two to your one!"

"All right! I guess I shall have to face the music. Have your blow-out, with all your frills, and send the bills to me!"

Hollis' little eyes looked red and keen.

"Suppose we just close off the bet with a check for five hundred? The german would cost three times that."

"Oh, I guess not," said Syme stolidly. "But if it does, I'll have to stand it."

He pushed back his chair, showing that the question was settled.

So it was that Hollis' cotillion, complimentary to Miss Page, was the most ambitious affair of the season. No expense was spared, for Hollis felt that he would be losing money if he did not make the bills as large as possible. The decorations, favors, flowers, souvenirs, music, and the supper afterwards, were all as elaborate as possible.

To Barbara, the evening was the culmination of all the enchanted summer, and the best and happiest part of it came just at the end. She was saying good-night to Peyton Meade at the foot of the stairs. Unable to keep back the pent-up emotion that seemed bursting his heart, he caught her slim hand for a moment.

"Barbara, I can't offer you luxuries as Hollis can, but I can ask you to share a name that has come to me unsullied, and that—please God—I am going to keep clean; and I can love and serve and worship you to the uttermost hour of my life!"

"Hurry, Barbara!" called her mother, half way up the stairs.

Obediently, Barbara followed.

"If you won't answer me now, I will follow you to your home and stay there until you do answer," came a determined voice from the bottom step.

Barbara climbed a stair or two, and then glanced back over her shoulder.

"I think we shall go home next week," she said softly.

Syme had watched the festivities at which he was the unsuspected host. He was nearly at the top of the winding stairs when Barbara passed him, with so radiant a face that he smiled responsively. Leaning over, he caught sight of Meade looking upward to catch a last fleeting glimpse of his divinity.

"At length I've discovered who is the nicest man in the hotel, next to me! I congratulate you on your discernment, Miss Barbara. That young fellow has as fine and honest a face as I've ever seen."

Barbara, too glad in the first glory of love's young dream to think of any concealment, caught Colonel Syme's wrinkled hand between her soft palms.

"Oh, dear, dear Colonel Syme!" she cried impulsively.

"It was well worth it," thought the old man, when he reached his room. "I've almost enjoyed the long summer, watching that child's pleasure. No one will ever suspect that Hollis didn't pay for his german. He'll be slipping out of social obligations for the next year on the plea of his heavy expenses this summer!"

The german decided Meade that it was Hollis who had sent Barbara the flowers that had come anonymously all summer, especially as none had ever come with Hollis' card.

Mrs. Page, who was somewhat sentimental, was of another opinion.

"Opposite our table sat a young man who was an invalid. He was not—well, not an F. F. V., you know, and Barbara never was introduced to him, but I noticed the longing, pathetic way in which he gazed at her."

So he did, but the poor young dyspeptic was looking with painful envy at the sweet stuffs and hot breads which Miss Page ate with impunity.

So it chanced, as Syme had hoped it might, that no one suspected that he had any part in little Barbara Page's enchanted summer. For we are older and wiser than the folks in Cinderella's day, and we no longer believe in the good offices of a fairy sponsor!